

Koster's Theatre (The Niobrara) -
H. E. Bonesteel Co. (Olson's Market)
Niobrara
Knox County
Nebraska

HABS No. NE-28

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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NE-28

KOSTER'S THEATRE (The Niobrara) - H.E. BONESTEEL COMPANY (Olson's Market)

Location: North side of Elm Street, Niobrara, Knox County, Nebraska.

USGS Niobrara Quadrangle Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates:

Koster's Theatre: 14.579490.4733830

H. E. Bonesteel Company: 14.579510.4733830.

Present Owner: United States of America (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers,
Omaha District).

Present Use: Vacant, scheduled to be demolished. (Both structures
were demolished after this documentation was written in
1977).

Significance: The theatre was the center of entertainment in the town
of Niobrara. Architecturally, the theatre reflects
simplicity in design with an arcaded entryway.

The H. E. Bonesteel Company was one of the town's
important stores, selling dry goods and groceries. It
was among the town's original structures that were moved
to the second townsite after the devastating 1881 flood.
Before a brick facade was put up in 1930, the structure
originally had a wooden false front, which is a
representative example of pioneer commercial architecture
of the late nineteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The H. E. Bonesteel Company store was
built in 1879. The theatre was built in the 1930s.
2. Architect: No record is found for the names of the
architects who designed the market and the theatre.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The store and the theatre
stand on block 6, lot 1 and the east side of lot 2 of Starr's
Addition to West Niobrara, which is in the second townsite of
Niobrara. The store was established in 1879 in the original
waterfront town of Niobrara by Henry E. Bonesteel. After the
flood of 1881 the store was moved to lot 1, which was
purchased by Bonesteel. The lot 1 stands to the west of the
east side of lot 2, which was also owned by Bonesteel and was
left unimproved until 1930, when the theatre was built.

The Bonesteel family held title to the property (lot 1 and the east side of lot 2) until selling it to Robert Raffan in 1913. Mr. Raffan had come to Niobrara in 1903 after running a department store in Omaha, and had managed the Bonesteel's store since his arrival. Mr. Raffan sold the property to Adolph Skokan in 1924. In 1930, the unimproved east side of lot 2 was sold to Harry Koster from Skokan. The theatre was built immediately on this lot. The store, on lot 1, remained in the hands of the Skokan family until its sale in 1962 to Fulton Olson. In 1938 the theatre was bought by Joseph Liska who remained as its owner until 1974 when both the theatre and the store were sold to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District for its flood control project. The original and subsequent owners of lot 1 and east side of lot 2, block 6 of Starr's Addition, before the construction of the theatre, from the Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County, Nebraska are as follows:

- 1881 Deed August 5, 1881, recorded August 5, 1881, Book D, page 344, James Starr to Henry E. Bonesteel. For consideration of \$600 for numerous lots
- 1896 Quit Claim Deed July 2, 1896, recorded July 6, 1896, Book U, page 255, John L. Turner to Henry E. Bonesteel. For consideration of \$1.00, held in trust for intended partnership.
- 1908 Settlement of estate January 3, 1908, recorded March 7, 1908, Book 10, page 220, Mary E. Perry - Undivided interest with Frances Bonesteel upon death of brother - will get full ownership of the property at death of Frances.
- 1914 Deed February 12, 1914, recorded February 13, 1914, Book 44 page 517, Mary G. Perry to Robert Raffan. For consideration of \$4,500 for lots 1 and east side of lot 2 and all improvements
- 1924 Deed January 17, 1924, recorded January 21, 1924, Book 55, page 152, Robert Raffan and wife to Adolph Skokan. For consideration of \$6,000 for lot 1 and east side of lot 2.

Except for title to the east side of lot 2 which was sold to Harry Koster in 1930 by Adolph Skokan, the following deals with the title transfers of lot 1:

- 1951 Deed July 18, 1951, recorded July 19, 1951, Book 79, page 120, Adolph Skokan and wife to Adolph Skokan and wife, Lou Skokan. For consideration of \$1.00 as joint tenants of lot 1
- 1961 Estate of Adolph Skokan December 21, 1961, recorded July 2, 1962, Book 8, page 525, Lou Skokan, widow, received property as a joint tenant.
- 1962 Deed June 30, 1962, recorded July 6, 1962, Book 85, page 478, Lou Skokan to Fulton Olson and wife. For consideration of \$6,000 for lot 1
- 1962 Mortgage June 30, 1962, recorded July 6, 1962, Book 63, page 520, Fulton Olson and wife to Lou Skokan. For consideration of \$4,000 for lot 1 (Release October 22, 1965, recorded January 28, 1966, Book 85, page 220)
- 1974 Deed June 7, 1974, recorded June 27, 1974, Book 95, page 661, Fulton Olson and wife to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. For consideration of \$17,000.

The following deals with the title transfers of the east side of lot 2, where the theatre stood:

- 1930 Deed April 4, 1930, recorded April 8, 1930, Book 60, page 429, Adolph Skokan and wife to Harry B. Koster. For consideration of \$1.00 for the east side of lot 2.
- 1930 Mortgage September 6, 1930, recorded September 10, 1930, Book 58, page 87, Harry B. Koster and wife to State Bank of Niobrara. For consideration of \$7,000 for east side of lot 2 (Mortgage transferred to J. B. Liska and Koster May 2, 1930, Book 58, page 127).

(Mortgage recorded between Liska and Koster May 2, 1931, Book 58, page 330. Release May 1, 1931, recorded June 18, 1931, Book 58, page 372)

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- 1938 Sheriff's Deed May 13, 1938, recorded May 16, 1938, Book 65, page 201, Sheriff of Knox County to Joseph B. Liska. For consideration of \$7,150 (result of a default in payment by Koster to Liska)
- 1938 Mortgage May 14, 1938, recorded May 20, 1938, Book 63, page 429, Joseph Liska to Hans Larsen. For consideration of \$1,000. (Release granted January 27, 1941. No record was found under that date in mortgage record).
- 1939 Deed January 20, 1939, recorded February 10, 1939, Book 65, page 444, Joseph B. Liska to Helen Liska. For consideration of \$4,500 for the east side of lot 2
- 1939 Mortgage January 20, 1939, recorded February 10, 1939, Book 63, page 494, Helen Liska to Joseph Liska. For consideration of \$4,500. (Release April 19, 1940, recorded June 28, 1940, Book 67, page 183
- 1940 Deed April 19, 1940, recorded June 28, 1940, Book 67, page 183, Helen Liska to Joseph B. Liska. For consideration of \$1.00
- 1974 Deed May 28, 1974, recorded June 13, 1974, Book 95, page 583, Joseph B. Liska to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. For consideration of \$2,650
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: George Vlansnik was the contractor. Charles Melena, a local contractor, did the carpentry (and possibly masonry) work in the theatre.
5. Original plan and construction: As evidenced by the early photographic views of the H. E. Bonesteel store, the building originally consisted of a clapboard-clad false front and large display windows. These commercial features were pioneer designs in early commercial architecture.

According to a newspaper article from the Niobrara Tribune dated July 3, 1930, when the theatre was to open:

"It is a splendid building in every respect. The side walls and ceiling are of celotex material for acoustical effect. The wainscoting is covered with plastic paint, leather effect. The floor has sufficient slope to make vision easy. The seating is from the main aisle and the seats are most comfortable. The cooling system is the most modern and assures comfort. The screen is the most modern, being porous, which assures the best production of sound. The equipment consists of two Simplex Projections of the most modern type, having an exclusive synchronating device which is rare and new and keeps the picture and the voice identical and correct. The light is a strong, low intensity arc light. The sound screen is of the latest and is rare in towns of this size. There is double amplification for emergencies. The sound system is Deluxe Model Best-Tone. There will be 240 very comfortable seats. The picture machines will be operated by an experienced operator, who at present is Carl Schwarz of Bloomfield. The equipment has been installed by Roy Chansky, an expert working for the Sound Service System of Omaha."

6. Alterations and additions: The brick false facade of the Bonesteel store was added in 1930 at the time of the construction of the new theatre. A newspaper description at the time describes it as follows:

"The new front on Skokan's store is to be extended until it meets the wall of the new theatre thus giving us about seventy five feet of new brick front where formerly only wood structures were seen."

A larger screen was installed in the late 1950s so that the better cinemascope movies could be shown. This resulted in the construction of a flight of stairs below the screen to provide a rear exit. This new screen blocked the original rear exit on the northwest corner.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Henry E. Bonesteel was a native of Oswego, New York. In the late 1870s he came west and settled in Yankton, South Dakota, engaging in general merchandising. He later moved to Springfield, South Dakota, again engaging in general merchandising and finally established one of the leading general merchandising stores

in Niobrara, Nebraska in 1879. Mr. Bonesteel moved the store to its second site in the newly platted town in 1881, and is said to have had the largest, best equipped store in town. According to one account, the store was described as follows:

"In the northeast corner of store was the largest, most beautiful display of Indian handiwork ever shown, at least in this part of the state; buckskin, tanned by the Indian women and soft as a cotton cloth, dress for men and women entirely covered by exquisite beadwork, in many colors, done by the native indian women, hundreds of smaller articles decorated with beautiful beadwork." (Niobrara Centennial 1856-1956, page 10).

Under Adolph Skokan's ownership of the store from 1924 to 1962, the various rooms in the store served as a beauty parlor, a creamery shop and an insurance office. Fulton Olson, the last owner of the store, continued to sell groceries and merchandise.

Mr. Joseph Liska owned the Niobrara Theatre from 1938 until the early 1970s and was probably the figure most closely associated with the theatre. In 1938, he acquired title to the property and all its equipment for \$7,150 and changed the name from Koster's Theatre to the Niobrara Theatre. The theatre was open year round with shows only on the weekends. When business was better, Mr. Liska began opening on Wednesdays also.

Mr. Elmer Krupiska, who used to help run the theatre as a young man, remembers "lines down around the block waiting to see the movie. It must have been the cheapest movie in the United States, maintaining prices of 35¢ for adults and 10¢ for children until the 1960s. Even then he would let children in free if they weren't able to pay." He ran the theatre with little or no profit, always letting friends and relatives in for free.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Two photocopies of the store building with the original wooden false front, turn of the century (1900s). Included in the HABS collection.

A photocopy of brick block of the store and the theatre after 1930. Included in the HABS collection.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County, Nebraska.

Interviews:

Elmer Krupiska, Niobrara, Nebraska, August, 1977, worked for Mr. Liska, details on alterations, mechanical equipment, etc.

Harley Eberly, Niobrara, Nebraska, August 1977, long time resident of Niobrara, uses of small offices between store and theatre.

Robert Olson, Niobrara, Nebraska, son of the last owner of the store, August 1977, information on room usage, basement contents, etc.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Niobrara Bicentennial Committee. Niobrara Centennial 1856-1956 (updated 1976). Niobrara, Nebraska: Verdigre Eagle, 1976.

Niobrara Tribune. Newspaper articles, December 25, 1913 April 10, 1930, July 3, 1930, April 31, 1938.

History of the State of Nebraska. Volume I. Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1882.

Prepared by: Kathryn Burns
Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
Summer 1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The H. E. Bonesteel store building is an excellent example of pioneer commercial architecture, having a clapboard-clad false front and large display windows. In 1930, under the ownership of Adolph Skokan, a red brick front facade was added to the store and extended to meet the similar brick facade of the new theatre then being erected. The theatre reflects simplicity in decoration but sophistication in design. The most prominent feature was its recessed front entrance with an arcade. Although simple in design, the brick block gave an added stability to the streetscape of the commercial area.
2. Condition of fabric: The condition of the store ranges from good to poor, while the theatre is in poor condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The store measures 105'-11 1/2" (three-bay front) x 50'-2". This structure is composed of two rectangles placed side by side, and is one-story with a basement.

The theatre, rectangular in shape, measures 25' (three-bay front) x 86'. It is a one-story structure with a small basement and a upper projection booth.

2. Foundations: The store sits on rubble stone foundation with mortar.

The theatre has a poured concrete foundation.

3. Wall construction, finish and color: The south (front) facade of the store is of deep red brick with raised mortar joints. The east wall, originally of clapboards, has been covered with rough brown painted plaster. Rear and west side walls are covered with green painted tin sheets with impressions simulating brickwork. Decorative brick detailing occurs on the front facade with the combined use of soldier coursing and concrete coping, with a diamond pattern at either end.

The south (front) facade of the theatre is dark red brick with deeply recessed raked joints. A course of soldiers articulates the first and second floor division. A decorative panel of soldiers and rowlocks appear just above the second story windows---three soldiers are set at a 45° angle creating decorative diamond patterns at either end of the panel. Another course of soldiers run directly below the concrete parapet coping. The rear and side walls are of structural clay tile. Rear corners combining clay tiles and standard red brick create a quoined effect. The walls of the arcade are covered with plaster and painted plywood sheeting.

4. Structural system, framing: The brick facade of the store is merely self-supporting. The rest of the structure is wood frame.

Like the store, the brick front facade of the theatre is self-supporting. Structural clay tiles supports wood frame roof. The rafters are set in an inverted truss formation.

5. Entrances, stoops: The front entrance of the store has a corner orientation cut back approximately four feet from the southeast corner of the building with a poured-cement stoop. A striped awning appears on the south elevation shading the front window.

The front theatre arcade is recessed. The second floor is supported by square brick columns on either side of the central, wood-paneled ticket booth projecting into the arcade area.

6. Chimneys: A plaster covered brick chimney appears at the rear roof peak of the store. A second taller brick chimney is on the lower portion of the gable roof in the middle of the east elevation. Circular tin vents are on the roof peak toward the front of store. A brick chimney with a clay pipe at the top rises from the flat roof, office area to the west of the store.

One brick chimney rises above the roof at the north (rear) end of the theatre. A large circular vent is on the top of the roof above the seating area. A smaller, more ornate conical vent provides ventilation for the projection room.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: A large single glass pane door provides entrance into the beauty parlor, an insurance office and the store. A metal panel is positioned below the large pane of glass. The east door into the apartment has a nine-pane glass with two square side-by-side panels below. The rear door into the apartment is a double glass pane door with a raised panel below.

Two south (front) double doors on either side of the ticket booth are recessed approximately seven feet from the front facade. Each door contains four narrow rectangular lights set vertically above with two long rectangular raised panels set side-by-side below. Rear exit doors are five-raised panels doors set one above the other.

- b. Windows: The store's large display windows secured by metal encasements occupies the major portion of the front (south) facade. The insurance office window is 6' x 7', about half the size of the store window. The left half of the store window has been replaced in a careless fashion by three panes with wooden rather than metal encasements. A hand-painted signage, "Tourist Suppliers", appears on the right pane. A frosted light with etched squares appears as a decorative band above the display windows and the entryway. The windows on the east wall of the store are wood frame windows running at the roofline level. Most windows in the apartment has been removed. Two remaining windows are wood frame.

Windows on the three exterior sides of the ticket booth has been removed. Windows on the front upper level of the theatre are three-over-one double-hung sash windows. Two central windows are coupled with single double-hung windows on either side.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The store roof is a gable roof covered with mineral surface asphalt shingles. The roof of the west office is a shallow shed roof sloping to the north. Shed roofs also cover all apartment additions to the rear.

The roof of the theatre is flat and slopes to the rear. It is covered with tar.

- b. Cornice: The front facades of the store and the theatre each has a brick parapet surmounted by a poured concrete coping. The brick false front line of the insurance office and beauty parlor is considerably lower than the two structures on either side of it.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The front corner entrance of the store opens into a long rectangular floor space, 23' x 80', functioning as the retail area. In the northwest corner of this area is a raised six-inch platform used as an office area. A door in the southwest corner of the room connects the grocery with the storefront insurance office. North of the insurance office are a small closet and a lavatory. The closet area links the insurance office with a long storage area that abuts the west wall of the store. Access to this storage space is also possible through a door on the center west wall of the store. A screened-in area for storing flour and similar items runs along the west storage wall with a partitioned area serving as the meatcutting area directly to the north. Shelves line all other walls. The west lavatory door provides the connecting line of the beauty parlor with the rest of the store. The beauty parlor is a small 11' x 21' area with a main street entrance. This area was used as a creamery (egg and cream buying station) previous to the beauty parlor established in the 1960s. Additional market storage is directly north behind the beauty parlor although accessible only through the previously mentioned storage space. A single doorway and sliding doors connect the two rooms with a loading-delivery space found to the rear.

The store has a small connecting apartment in the rear attached by a door in the center north wall of the store. There is also a separate entrance on the east side of Fifth Avenue. A living room, kitchen and enclosed porch are directly behind the store. Two bedrooms and a bath are behind the storage room adjacent to the store. A staircase along the east wall in storage adjacent to the retail area leads to the basement. Although inaccessible, it reportedly contained a small coal (later converted to oil) furnace.

In the first floor of the theatre, double doors on either side of the front arcade provide entry into a narrow inner lobby approximately 2' x 6'. An enclosed staircase runs along the west wall to the second floor. A center door on the north wall leads into the main theatre area. The center aisle has a slight upward ramp at the entrance to the theatre

which gradually slopes down to the screen area. The original screen was on the center of the north wall with exit door openings on either side of the screen. A large screen was installed in the late 1950s which covers the full width of the structure. This larger screen required the construction of a set of stairs going down below the screen to allow for passage through the rear exit. This alteration was only made on the west side of the screen, however. The new screen was allowed to block the east, rear exit. A sound chamber sits just behind the screen with a lift-up door behind, which provided access to a cellar housing modern air handling equipment.

The enclosed staircase along the east lobby wall leads to the second-story hall. This hall houses the small projection booth, 8' x 17'. A removable wall panel on the east side of the north wall in the upstairs hallway provides access to a structural area above the ceiling on the theatre and below the roof.

2. Stairways: The enclosed wood stairway to the projection level is a straight run with even-width, vertical tongue-and-groove siding.
3. Flooring: The store has three-inch hardwood flooring. Linoleum tiles cover the floors of the insurance office and the beauty parlor. The westernmost rear storage area has a poured-concrete floor.

Even width wood flooring cover the entire theatre. The floor in the projection booth is of poured concrete with a rug covering.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls and ceiling of the store has beaded tongue-and-groove wood painted white. The insurance room has imitation paneled ceiling and painted plaster walls, while the beauty parlor and the apartment has plaster walls and ceiling. Painted wood panels cover the walls of the lavatory and the connecting closet. The wall of the extreme west storage area is of exposed clay tile. The east wall is covered with simulated brick tin sheeting (this material is also found on the rear exterior walls since this space was once an exterior space). The interior walls of the central storage area are of rough wood.

The inner lobby of the theatre, with the exception of the west wall, is covered with beaded tongue-and-groove panels. The west wall is dark brown painted plaster that matches with the color of the woodwork. The ceiling is plaster. In the main theatre area all walls and ceiling cover are sound absorbant panels and acoustical tiles, respectively. The walls are painted green and held in place with four-inch wide battens. The north wall, behind the screen, is unfinished exposed structural clay tiles. The second floor hall has painted plaster walls with dark stained woodwork and baseboards. The ceilings are of a painted composition board. The entire interior of the projection booth is covered with galvanized metal.

5. Doorways and doors: Sliding batten doors are located in the two storage areas of the store. Doors in the commercial and residential areas are four raised-panel and five raised-panel horizontally set doors.

The stairway door in the front lobby of the theatre is a beaded tongue-and-groove, stained mahogany door. The projector door has five horizontally set panels with a galvanized metal covering.

6. Decorative features and trim: A metal painted store sign on the front facade, "Olson's General Merchandise and Grocery", is flanked with two "7 Up" logos at each end.

The dark stained mahogany woodwork, with much tongue-and-groove detailing, gives the theatre a warm, finished appearance.

7. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: The store was originally heated by a coal furnace, which was later converted to oil under Adolph Skokan's ownership.

The heating for the theatre was originally wood and coal, which was later converted to gas. A water cooling system is in the rear shed. This system sprinkled water over charcoal as an air conditioning method.

- b. Lighting: The theatre lights are of incandescent type. Incandescent bulbs also illuminated the front entrance arcade.

All interior lighting in the Bonesteel store has been removed.

D. Site:

- 1. General setting and orientation: The block faces south on Elm Street.
- 2. Outbuildings: Both structures have rear sheds.

Prepared by Perry Benson
Architect
Historic American Buildings
Survey
Summer 1977
and
Kathryn Burns
Historian
Historic American Buildings
Survey
Summer 1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Niobrara project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in co-operation with the citizens of the Village of Niobrara. The project was funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District, in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the construction of the Gavins Point Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, chief of HABS, the project was completed in the HABS Field Office in Niobrara, Nebraska during the summer of 1977 by project supervisor Perry Benson (University of Pennsylvania), project historian Kathryn A. Burns (George Washington University), team foreman Larry Jones (Texas Tech University) and student architects Peter Darlow (McGill University), Lisa Becker (Notre Dame University) and Darl Rastorfer (University of Pennsylvania). The written historical and architectural data was prepared by Kathryn Burns, and edited by Susan McCown, a historian in the HABS office in August 1979. Two exterior photos were taken by Sam Amato in the fall of 1977.